DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 698 EA 028 186

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TITLE Public School Choice Programs, 1993-94: Availability and Student Participation. Issue Brief.
INSTITUTION American Institutes for Research, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY National Center for Education Statistics (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO IB-9-96; NCES-97-909
PUB DATE Dec 96
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM Phone: 1-800-424-1616; Internet: http://www.ed.gov/NCES
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Statistical Data (110)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Educational Supply; Elementary Secondary Education; *Enrollment; *Free Choice Transfer Programs; Magnet Schools; Nontraditional Education; *Participation; *Public Schools; *School Choice; School Districts

ABSTRACT

Public school-choice programs are diverse and offer within- and outside-district flexibility in meeting student needs. This bulletin examined data available from the 1993-94 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), to answer questions about regional differences in choice programs, availability, and student participation in choice programs. The data show that in 1993-94, the percentage of public school districts with school-choice programs varied widely across the four regions of the country. Among all public school districts in the United States, interdistrict choice was the most widely available choice program option in 1993-94. Among districts with choice programs, smaller percentages of students participated in interdistrict choice than in either intradistrict or magnet-school choice programs. The variation in participation rates may reflect not only variation in parents' and students' willingness to participate in different types of public school choice programs, but also variation in districts' policies and capabilities regarding choice program participation. One figure and two tables are included. (LMI)

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ISSUE BRIEF

DECEMBER 1996
IB-9-96

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ISSUE BRIEF

Public School Choice Programs, 1993–94: Availability and Student Participation

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Public school choice programs are diverse and offer within- and outside-district flexibility in meeting student needs. Intradistrict choice programs, which constitute one type of public school choice, give students the opportunity to attend other public schools within their district of residence. In some intradistrict choice programs, parents and students are required to select the schools in their district to attend, including their neighborhood schools (Chubb and Moe 1990). In contrast, interdistrict choice programs allow parents and students to choose public schools outside of their district of residence. Magnet schools, which may or may not be offered in conjunction with intradistrict or interdistrict choice programs, constitute a third form of public school choice. Magnet schools offer distinctive educational programs and/or instructional approaches that are designed to attract students with particular interests (Steel and Levine 1994). Despite these distinctions, a common element among all public school choice programs is that they permit parents and students to select among instructional offerings within public schools.

Does the availability of public school choice programs differ by region? Which choice program type is most widely available? What percentage of students in choice districts actually participate in the programs? Data available from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), can be used to address these questions. In 1993–94, SASS queried public school districts about the availability and extent of participation in public school choice programs.[1]

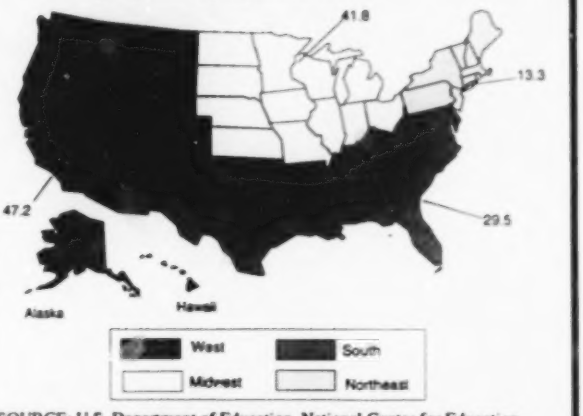
In 1993–94, the percentage of public school districts with school choice programs varied widely across the four regions of the country.

While over 47 percent and nearly 42 percent of districts in the West and Midwest, respectively, reported having any choice programs, only about 13 percent of districts in the Northeast reported having any such programs (figure 1). The availability of public school choice programs in the South fell in between these extremes, with about 30 percent of districts offering some type of choice program.

Among all public school districts in the United States, interdistrict choice was the most widely available choice program option in 1993–94.

In addition to inquiring about the availability of public school choice programs in general, school district respondents were asked to indicate which types of choice programs—enrollment in any school in this district (i.e., "intradistrict choice"), enrollment in schools in other districts (i.e., "interdistrict choice"), and magnet schools—were offered in their districts and the numbers of students participating in them. With respect to availability, interdistrict choice was the predominant public school choice program option in the United States and in each region (table 1). Not surprisingly, intradistrict choice programs were more likely to be found in larger

Figure 1. Percentage of public school districts with choice programs, by region: 1993–94



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993–94 Schools and Staffing Survey (Teacher Demand and Shortage Questionnaire for Public School Districts [LEAs]).

Table 1. Percentage of public school districts with various choice programs, by region and district size: 1993–94

	Enrollment in any School in this Dist.	Enrollment in Schools in Other Dist.	Magnet School Choice
Overall	13.8	28.6	7.8
Region			
Northeast	5.5	9.6	4.2
Midwest	15.1	34.8	7.7
South	10.4	24.0	7.7
West	24.1	41.8	12.1
District Size			
<1,000	8.7	32.2	6.0
1,000–4,999	16.1	24.2	6.5
5,000–9,999	24.0	23.1	11.7
≥10,000	36.1	32.7	33.0

NOTE: Districts could offer more than one type of choice program. All public school districts are included, even those with only one school at a level.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993–94 Schools and Staffing Survey (Teacher Demand and Shortage Questionnaire for Public School Districts [LEAs]).

[1] The denominator for the percentage calculations in figure 1 and table 1 excludes the 0.3 percent of districts that do not enroll any K–12 students.

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districts. This is consistent with the notion that intradistrict choice in the smallest districts may be affected by the small number of schools in each district. A similar pattern is observed for magnet school choice programs. Interdistrict choice programs were equally likely to be found in districts with fewer than 1,000 students and 10,000 or more students, and were less likely to be found in districts with 1,000–9,999 students.

Among districts with choice programs, smaller percentages of students participated in interdistrict choice than in either intradistrict or magnet school choice programs.

Overall, fewer than 2 percent (about 208,000) of students who were enrolled in districts with interdistrict choice programs chose to attend schools outside their own districts of residence in 1993–94 (table 2). In comparison, nearly 25 percent (approximately 2,900,000) of students in districts with intradistrict choice programs and 8 percent (about 924,000) of students in districts with magnet schools participated in these choice programs.

Policies governing intradistrict choice programs in selected districts may contribute to the relatively high student participation rate in intradistrict choice programs compared to magnet school and interdistrict choice programs, as well as to the markedly different regional participation rates for this type of choice program. As noted above, some districts with intradistrict choice programs *require* all parents with children at particular grade levels to choose their children's school, including parents who opt to send their children to their neighborhood school. For this reason, participation rates in these districts may approach 100 percent. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Montclair, New Jersey, and East Harlem, New York, are examples of districts that require participation of all students at certain grade levels in intradistrict choice programs (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1992); the prevalence of forced intradistrict choice in the Northeast generally may help to explain why the participation rate in this program is substantially higher there than in the other three regions.

Discussion

The above results indicate that considerable variation exists among regions and among districts of different sizes in the availability and type of public school choice programs. The regional variation in choice availability and type may reflect statewide legislative efforts regarding public school choice. In mid-1993, of the five states that mandated intradistrict choice, four were in the West and the fifth was in the Midwest; of the five states that mandated interdistrict choice, three were in the Midwest and two were in the West. In addition, a number of states, such as Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey, allow districts to participate voluntarily in intradistrict and/or interdistrict choice (Bierlein, Sheane, and Mulholland 1993).

Table 2. Percentage of students enrolled in districts with specific choice programs who participated in each program: 1993–94

	Enrollment in any School in this Dist.	Enrollment in Schools in Other Dist.	Magnet School Choice
Overall	24.5	1.6	8.0
Region			
Northeast	75.2	1.2	20.6
Midwest	10.4	2.1	9.5
South	24.8	1.4	4.8
West	11.3	1.6	4.5

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993–94 Schools and Staffing Survey (Teacher Demand and Shortage Questionnaire for Public School Districts [LEAs]).

Although such state-level legislative activity may influence public school choice availability, it appears that districts themselves exercise considerable control over programs offered and participation levels. Just as some districts may require participation in their choice programs, other districts may limit school or district transfers for a number of reasons, including limited capacity and racial balance (Bierlein, Sheane, and Mulholland 1993) and students' academic or athletic abilities, and others may be limited simply by the number of schools in the district. Thus, the variation in participation rates noted above may reflect not only variation in parents' and students' willingness to participate in different types of public school choice programs, but also variation in districts' policies and capabilities regarding choice program participation. Further research that reaches beyond SASS data could examine the timing of implementation of different choice programs and the nature of different requirements (e.g., tuition and fees) that districts may impose on individuals to participate in such programs.

References and Related Publications

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Issue Briefs present information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences are statistically significant at the .05 level. In the design, conduct, and data processing of NCES surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error. For additional details on SASS data collection methods and definitions, see the following U.S. Department of Education publications: *1993–94 Schools and Staffing Survey: Sample Design and Estimation* (NCES 96–089) and *Quality Profile for SASS: Aspects of the Quality of Data in the Schools and Staffing Surveys (SASS)* (NCES 94–340).

This **Issue Brief** was prepared by Karen DeAngelis and Robert Rossi, American Institutes for Research. To obtain standard errors or definitions of terms for this **Issue Brief**, or to obtain additional information about the Schools and Staffing Survey, contact Charles H. Hammer (202) 219–1330. To order additional copies of this **Issue Brief** or other NCES publications, call 1–800–424–1616. NCES publications are available on the Internet at http://www.ed.gov/NCES.

NCES 97–909